



Topic-Comment Constructions in Mandarin Chinese

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Goals

Problem: Topic-comment constructions have been widely documented in Chinese and other languages, but it is difficult to get information about how and in what contexts topic-comment constructions are used

Asking speakers about specific sentences does not illustrate **natural/informal speech**

Topic constructions mainly appear in **spoken language**, with little evidence in written resources

Solution: Create a **corpus** based on **theatrical scripts** to analyze contexts and varieties of topic-comment constructions

Information Structure

Topic and comment are considered basic notions of **Information Structure** (IS), which deals with the temporary state of the communicator’s mind

Manfred Krifka (2008) argues that the basic notions of IS are scientific notions that package information to meet immediate communicative needs of the speakers

Standard constructions “first lay out the premises and then lead to a conclusion, and [topic-comment constructions] start with the conclusion and then motivate it or elaborate on it” (Krifka 272)

The **Common Ground** is the information that is mutually known to be shared and is continuously modified in communication

“[T]he notions of topic and comment fail to be IS terms in the sense that they always relate to the temporary state of the CG” (Krifka 267)

Results

Out of 136 utterances translated from the play “Selling Yams” (卖山药), 7 contain topic-comment constructions

Of these, 2 are generic topics, 2 are definite topics, and 3 are verb topics

Below are the glosses of the topic-comment examples, with the topics highlighted:

实在卖不了 就 带 回去 喂 猪。
shí zài mài bù liǎo jiù dài huí qù wèi zhū
truly sell unable to right away to carry to return to feed pig
With the truly unsellable ones, carry them back to feed the pigs right away.

绿色食品 呱呱叫。
lǜ sè shí pǐn guā guā jiào
organic food excellent
Excellent organic food.

今天哪 我要 吆喝 出 个 新 名 堂。
jīn tiān nǎ wǒ yào yāo hè chū gè xīn míng táng
today which I want shout out some new varieties
As for today, I want to shout out some new varieties.

蒸 煮 拌 炒 味道 好。
zhēng zhǔ bàn chǎo wèi dào hào
steam cook mix stir-fry flavor good
Stir-fry cooking, good flavor.

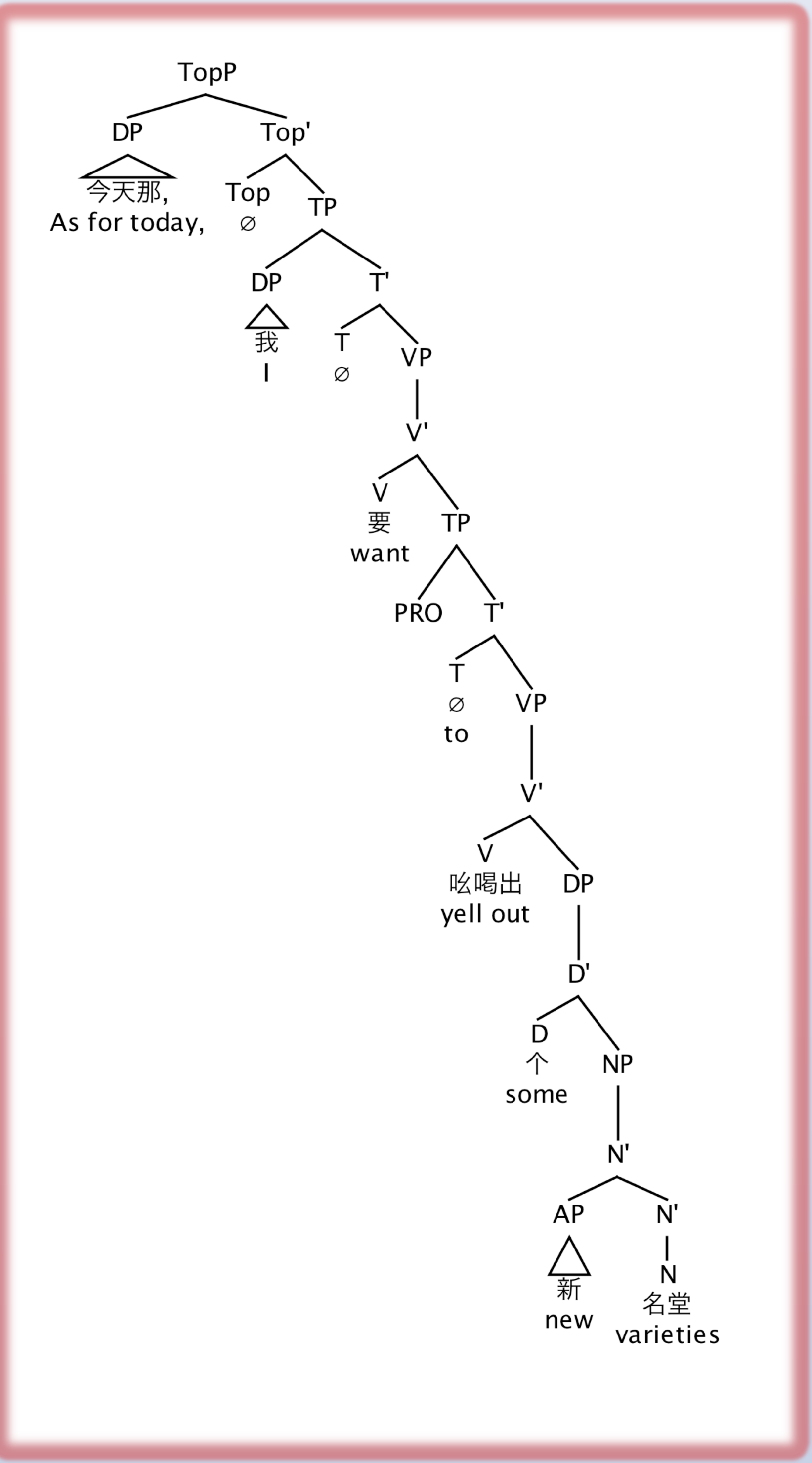
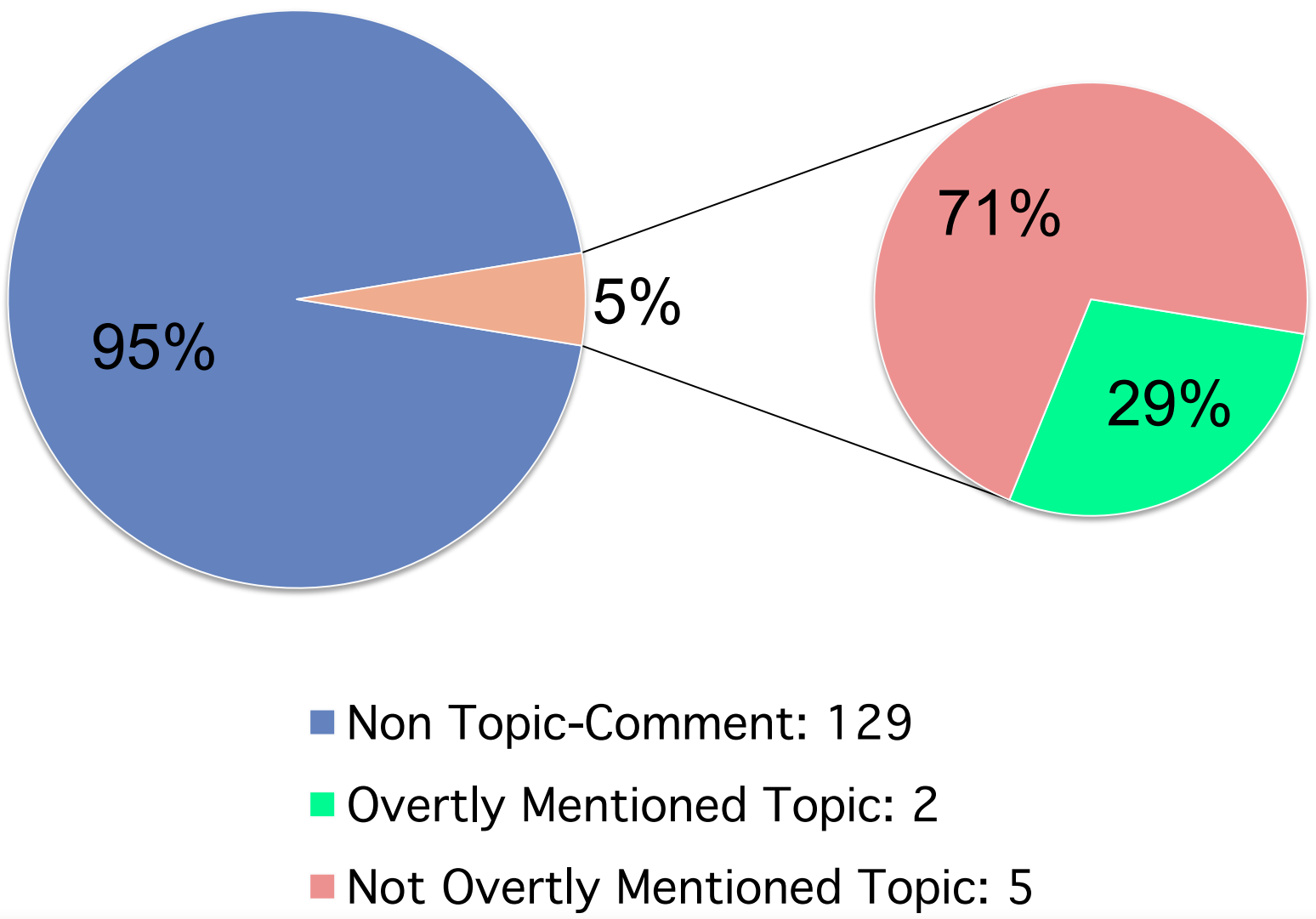
还 价 还 价, 越 还 越 假!
huán jià huán jià yuè hái yuè jiǎ
to bargain to bargain the more also the more fake
Bargaining and bargaining, the more there are the more fake they become!

心 血 汗 水, 一 样 不 少。
xīn xiě hàn shuǐ yī yàng bù shǎo
heart blood sweat equal to not few
There’s no shortage of hard work and sweat.

趁 着 现 在 没 人。
chèn zhe xiàn zài méi rén
to avail indicates action in now not person
oneself progress
Now no one avails.

Type of Topic	Frequency
Generic Topics:	2
Definite Topics:	2
Verb Topics:	3

Distribution of Topic-Comment Constructions



Conclusion

Narrowly describing the properties of topic and comment does not capture the whole picture of how topics are used

Topic-comment constructions have a much wider scope of use and are employed in a wider variety of contexts

Tsao’s proposal that topics must be definite does not apply most of the time

The largest category of topics are verb topics

This means that topics may fall into grammatical categories other than nouns, and the definition of topic must be expanded to encompass these types of topics as well

Only 2 of the noun topics I found are definite; the other 2 are generic topics that do not refer to any specific thing

Krifka was correct in proposing that topics and can refer to long-term Common Ground as well as temporary states

Topics also need not be overtly mentioned in previous discourse, it is sufficient for their existence to be implied

Topics may also allude to something always in existence rather than something previously mentioned

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